

# GROWING UP WITH US™...

## A Newsletter For Those Who Care For Children

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©PARENTAL DIVORCE... SUPPORTING THE CHILD

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**Behavioral Objectives:** After reading this newsletter the learner will be able to:

1. Discuss factors affecting children's adjustment to parental divorce, as well as typical reactions of children at various developmental stages.
2. Discuss guidelines to assist parents in supporting their children's well-being during the divorce process.

Divorce is a fact of modern life. It is estimated that 50% of marriages, in the United States, end in divorce, with the majority involving children. An even higher divorce rate occurs in families when a child has a chronic illness or disability. The average marriage ends in divorce after less than 7 years, so many children are very young at the time of parental separation. With more than 1 million children affected each year by divorce, the healthcare provider is in a unique position to assist families and children through the divorce process.

This newsletter will discuss factors which can affect children's adjustment to divorce of their parents, as well as typical reactions of children at various developmental stages. Guidelines for the healthcare professional to assist parents in supporting their children's well-being during the divorce process will also be discussed.

### PARENTAL DIVORCE

During a divorce, the parents may be too preoccupied with their own feelings, needs, and life changes to be supportive of their children. Disruption of the family structure can have a profound effect on children. Some of the effects on children are due to:

**1. Parental Loss:** Divorce often results in the loss of one parent, at least on a regular basis, for the children. With this loss, children also lose the knowledge, skills and resources (emotional, financial, etc.) of that parent. Many children will go through the grieving process for the non-custodial parent. For example, an eight year old might say, "I'm going to pretend that when I wake up, Dad's at work. And, when I go to bed, he still is." Moving from denial, the stages of anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance are often experienced.

**2. Exposure To Conflict:** Conflict is frequently part of families that are or have undergone divorce. The degree to which children are exposed to conflict may have substantial negative effects on children's well-being.

**3. Parental Loss:** : Another result of divorce is that children living in single parent families are less likely to have as many economic resources as children living in "intact" families.

**4. Stress:** Divorce often results in many changes in children's living situations, such as changing schools, child care, homes, etc. Children often, also, have to make adjustments to changes in relationships with friends and extended family members. These changes create a stressful environment for children.

**5. Poor Parental Adjustment:** The psychological adjustment of parents to divorce is a significant factor in their children's well-being. Generally, how children fare when parents divorce is due in part to the mental health of the parents. Divorce is a transition period for the adults involved, often filled high emotions, as well as lawyer appointments, court and, perhaps, custody battles.

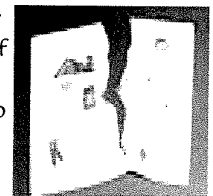
However, blaming the other parent or talking badly about him or her must be avoided. This is the only mother and father the children know. And, the children should not have to take on the responsibility of supporting either parent or choosing "sides". Additionally, it is common for the oldest sibling to take on the absent parents responsibilities—"You're the man of the house now."

**6. Lack of Parental Competence:** Much of what happens to children, in general, is related to the skill of parents in helping them develop. Overall, the evidence indicates that many parents report diminished parenting practices immediately following divorce.

### AGE-SPECIFIC REACTIONS

Although young children may not understand the implications of divorce, tension within the family and between parents is communicated to children of all ages. Young children are egocentric and view the separation of their parents in terms of how it will affect them. They tend to blame themselves for the divorce.

Older children are more likely to perceive one parent as responsible, becoming angry and displaying acting-out behaviors, such as fighting and poor school performance. Following are developmental implications of divorce during the crisis phase. During the adjustment phase of separation and divorce, questions and behaviors may reappear periodically as children enter new stages of development.



**INFANTS** form emotional bonds with their parents, particularly the primary caregiver, during the first year. Development of trust is essential. When parents divorce, there may be an interference with the attachment process, particularly with the non-custodial parent. However, as long as the baby's basic needs are met, reactions will be minimal for this age group. However, during the divorce process the infant may be irritable or have difficulty eating or sleeping.

**TODDLERS**, ages 1-3 years, have a need for sameness. Familiar people, places and routines provide comfort and security for toddlers. Therefore, change, as in the family structure caused by divorce, may be threatening to young children. Toddlers may react to the separation from the absent parent with increased whining, temper tantrums and verbal pleas for the other parent—"I want Mommy!" The young child may also fear abandonment. Since one parent, who loved him or her, has left, the child often fears the other parent will do the same. Toddlers typically will regress during this crisis period to behaviors reminiscent of a more secure time in their life, such as sucking their thumb again, or wanting to be continuously held.



**PRESCHOOLERS**, ages 3-6 years, are still egocentric and engage in magical thinking. Fantasy and reality are not clearly separated. They believe their actions or thoughts cause events to happen, including the separation of their parents - "If only I'd put my toys away, Dad wouldn't have left us." They also will fill in what they don't understand with their vivid imaginations. They may view the separation from the absent parent as punishment and may be consciously fearful that they will be abandoned by the remaining parent, especially if they're not 'good'.

**SCHOOL-AGERS**, ages 6-12 years, can be reasoned with. That is, they can understand cause and effect and a previously egocentric view is replaced by empathy.

These new thought processes allow the school-ager to see things from the point of view of another. Therefore, most school-agers are able to cope with parental separation better than younger children. However, when parents divorce during this stage of development, the school-ager still experiences intense pain and loneliness and may feel deprived of both parents' attention and the security of the family. Intense anger and resentment may be directed at both parents and they invariably wish for the parents to reunite. This is common after the divorce is final, often long after. Embarrassment is also common and the child may think he or she is the only one in his class, neighborhood or city "that is divorced".

School performance is commonly affected because of an inability to focus on learning. Teachers and school counselors should be informed of the impending divorce, so they have a better understanding of any alterations in the children's behavior and performance. Many schools have support programs for children of divorce, which are helpful in reassuring the school-ager they are not the only child whose parents have divorced.

#### TELLING THE CHILDREN

Parents who are contemplating divorce are often very concerned about the effects it will have on their children. Disruption of the family structure often causes strong feelings of parental guilt. Parents are understandably hesitant to tell children about their decision to divorce. This is news that will invariably cause pain and change the children's life. Divorce is usually preceded by tension or arguing in the home, therefore, children typically are aware something is wrong before they are told.



However, the children still need to be officially told.

If possible, the initial disclosure should include both parents and all siblings, followed by later discussions with each child individually. If the parents can cooperate enough to do this, it will send a positive message about the future. How far in advance of the actual separation children should be told depends of their ages.

Since young children's concept of time is limited, 1 or 2 days prior to the actual separation may be appropriate.

For older children, more days may give time for asking questions. For parents whose children are a variety of ages, the timing of the family discussion may be somewhere in the middle.

Ample time should be set aside for the discussion, and it should take place during a period of calm, not during or after an argument. The discussion should include the basic reason for the divorce, such as, "We both love you very much, but Mom and Dad aren't going to live together anymore." Again, neither parent should speak negatively about or blame the other parent, during the initial disclosure, as well as ever. Additionally, neither parent should make promises, or act on them, out of guilt or to ease the children's pain, such as, "When you come visit me we'll go to the park whenever you want." Each parent must also avoid conversations with others that the children may overhear.



A common initial reaction to learning of parental separation, especially for preschoolers and younger school-agers is, "Why Daddy?!", at a hysterical pitch. The child may also plea, "We have enough room for you too! Please Mommy!" Children should be encouraged to express their feelings openly, including sadness, fear, anger and resentment, without punishment. And, they must be reassured. Children long for consistency and order in their lives. They need to know where they will live, who will take care of them and how often they will see the non-custodial parent. It is imperative that whatever visitation is agreed upon, that it is followed. This will provide consistency and security. Parents must also see their separation from the viewpoint of all the children. For example, a 3 year old may want to know where the dog will live; the 15 year old whether she'll have to change schools.

*With divorce being so common in our society, healthcare providers, who care for children and their families, are in a unique position to provide parental education and support of children.*

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